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Formative interventions and practice-development: A methodological perspective on teacher rounds



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1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine Rounds as a research-based method of developing practice in school settings, a method that claims to integrate teacher professional development and school improvement. We see these research goals (teacher learning and organisational development) as linked and mutually generative (Corwin, 1975) but as goals that nonetheless raise some questions about the development of practice itself—in this case, the professional practice of teaching in schools. Our focus is on Rounds (specifically Teacher Rounds, Del Prete, 2013) as a means of research-based development that has a wider collective and social dimension, a method that proposes a structured and systematic approach to collaboration among teachers with the goal of developing the practice of teaching through the generation of new knowledge in the practice situation. In its emphasis on the development of practice as a goal (perhaps the primary goal) of research activity, Rounds might therefore be understood as a formative intervention, an evidence-driven tool that has a practitioner-centred view of the development of their practice at its heart. Engeström makes a fundamental distinction between formative intervention and design experiment as types of research: formative interventionists work *with* practitioners and from *their* perspective – and do so with a developmental purpose – rather than seeking to deliver findings (e.g. previously published research findings) to practitioners for them to implement with varying degrees of fidelity. In these ways, our discussion in this article is therefore methodological: we analyse Rounds as a type of collaborative research that seeks to generate new knowledge that can inform the development of practice, and our analysis proceeds by way of a comparison with another type of collaborative research that has the same end-goal. Our analysis is not based on our own participation in a Rounds intervention but from our examination of the research literature, our observation of Rounds in action in other settings and the planning of our own Rounds intervention in a group of schools in London.

At the same time, our own previous work has involved collaborations with teachers with formative goals and we have also engaged in practice-developing research that has drawn on a related but distinct tradition of work. Ellis (e.g. 2011, 2010, etc.) has worked alongside teachers, to learn in and from practice and to help teachers to develop their collective practices.

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Gower (2015) is currently engaged in collaborative teacher professional development using video as a tool. Frederick, as a school leader, has long-standing experience of operationalizing different approaches to teacher development in the context of school improvement. And Childs has studied the use of physical space in teacher collaboration that is intended to develop their pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. Childs et al., 2013). Ellis's approach to practice-developing work, in particular, has been informed by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), not because of a particular commitment to the role of one specific theory in the improvement of educational practices but because CHAT is characterised by at least two distinctive, methodological claims. First, if it is enacted as its originators in Helsinki intended, it involves a method that is, in terms, development *and* research. Rather than accepting this integration of research and development as the lesser form of 'applied research' (distinct from 'basic' research in Psychology or the Learning Sciences, for example), CHAT-informed research sees this integration as likely to lead to more rigour and to produce better research that answers difficult questions in complex situations. The development of practice – from the perspective of the practitioners – therefore becomes a form of research that involves the production of new social scientific knowledge about practice (and the challenges of changing practice) itself. As Olson (2004) has pointed out:

The reputation of educational research is tarnished less by the lack of replicable results than by the lack of any deeper theory that would explain why the thousands of experiments that make up the literature of the field appear to have yielded so little. (p. 25)

In other words, CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development are less likely to lead to frustration with teachers or among teachers for not enacting change with high levels of fidelity to the interventionist's ideas. Indeed, the claim is that they are more likely to provide insights into the challenge of stimulating change in practices and they are more likely to be sustainable (although this last point, as with other traditions of practice-development, continues to be moot).

Second, CHAT-informed formative interventions involve working with and alongside teachers and other practitioners rather than working *on* them. The starting points for the specific problems of practice have come from teachers as practitioners and the outcomes of the collaborative activity have to meet the tests of reliability and fitness-for-purpose of these practitioners rather than only the interventionists, whether managers driven by performance targets or academics driven by their own disciplinary cultures of performativity. So the quality of communication that takes between practitioners and between practitioners and interventionists in these sorts of projects are vital—what CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development seek to achieve is a mediating social space where all participants can come together, safely, and talk, to collaborate; communication is intended to enable to collective examination of current practice, to make distinctions and ultimately decisions that are likely to move practice forward. So CHAT-informed development and research, for example, is not like a design experiment where the researcher thinks they might have the answer and asks teachers, whose interests may or may not coincide, to help them test this out.

1.1. A methodological perspective

The points of contact between Rounds and CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development are interesting, we believe, and will help us to structure the methodological discussion in this article. We use the term *methodological* to signal our interest in the common stance of Rounds and CHAT-informed approaches to practice-development: a commitment to research (defined in its most basic sense as the generation of new knowledge through systematic enquiry) and a commitment to participatory ways of knowing in which the role of any outside 'researcher' is not to lend the process authority or objectivity. The focus in Rounds of gathering data through observation for joint analysis, the importance of conversation and open communication in that analysis, the future-orientation to the work of the Rounds activity and the underlying commitment to seeing theory and practice as a whole rather than as separate, hierarchically-ordered entities—all these align easily with the general CHAT approach, as we will show in this paper, and they both might therefore be understood as interesting forms of specifically educational research.

That said, we do think there are important differences that might be worthy of discussion and help to develop the Rounds approach as an enabling intervention and to understand the terms of the relationship between practice-development and research more generally. We will not be arguing that Rounds needs to learn from CHAT, however. CHAT has its own learning to do. But there are three areas in which we think further clarification and elaboration of the methodology of Rounds would be useful. The first is the relationship between individual and collective practice; this is a perennial concern for CHAT also. This question addresses how developing the work – the teaching – of an individual teacher through systematic enquiry can have wider impact on their colleagues, their department, their school. Teachers are not only a collection of individual workers behind closed classroom doors. They are part of an organisation and also part of a field or practice (such as high school Mathematics teaching) with its own historically-developed norms, values and bodies of knowledge. What is the possible relationship between individual practice-development and collective or organisational practice development? And how do we know?

The second methodological question addresses the role of theory in the process of Rounds; the usefulness (or otherwise) of abstract, propositional knowledge, and how this might or might not take the development of a practice forward. CHAT doesn't argue that abstract concepts alone will improve practice. CHAT does, though, as did Vygotsky (1974), argue that by bringing people's own ideas into contact with some 'scientific' (academic) ideas, you can then develop mature concepts, a hybrid of abstract and spontaneous concepts that help people to do some work in the world. Our view is that, perhaps

paradoxically, CHAT over-relies on and over-emphasises theory (see Ellis, 2011); it claims that it is through the insertion of the theory (most commonly associated with the triangular representation of the activity system) that people's perceptions are changed and new futures are possible. We are not sure it is as simple as that always. As far as Rounds are concerned, however, in what ways does theory figure in helping participants work out answers to their own questions? Or doesn't it? And is there an underlying theory of change driving Rounds that needs to be made more explicit?

The third question concerns the meaning of collaboration in the Rounds approach. The word 'collaboration', like the word 'community', is often assumed to be a good thing and always and inevitably useful in professional development and school improvement. What do we mean by collaboration, however, and how might it be useful, if it is? What kinds of collaboration mark out the Rounds approach as particularly useful or effective in achieving the twin goals of teacher learning and organisational development? We do not propose to 'answer' these questions in a definitive sense in the course of the article but they will be driving our examination of the Rounds approach from a methodological perspective.

1.2. *Defining rounds: Learning from medicine?*

The idea of Rounds as a practice-developing intervention has been derived from clinical medical education where senior doctors conduct regular discussions with junior and trainee clinicians at the bed-side of patients. The focus of these discussions in the medical setting is the accurate diagnosis of the patient's condition and the formulation of a treatment plan and associated monitoring (c.f. Ker, Cantilla, & Ambrose, 2008; RCP and RCN, 2012) in order to build an understanding of appropriate behaviours and ways of practical reasoning on the part of the less experienced clinicians. In Education, Rounds has been taken up in different ways – and usually with greater emphasis on formalised, systematic data generation – but the focus on improvement of the 'condition' is a common factor. Some versions of Rounds in Education are more hierarchical than others – somewhat like the medical model where it is the senior or leading clinician who, while facilitating a learning conversation, nonetheless drives the participants to the diagnosis and treatment in ways that align with established protocols. Instructional Rounds, for example, involves principals (headteachers), superintendents (local education officials) and teachers coming together in order to generate improvement at a system (school network or district) level. These senior leaders (and others) visit classrooms in a host school in order to examine a 'problem of practice' that has meaning across the system. Following group observations of classroom teaching, the observers reconvene and compare notes in order to refine the 'diagnosis' of the problem and to formulate ideas about how the practitioners might respond. No judgments are made about individuals or groups of teachers and protocols are used to agree upon and analyse what was observed. The core principle of this version of Rounds is what Elmore (2004) refers to as 'the consensus view' of powerful teacher learning which is that 'teachers learn through social interaction around a problem of practice' (p. 56). In order for new practices to be developed, Elmore believes 'support for collegial interaction' is required and this support is what can be provided by the Instructional Rounds. The conclusion of the work of an Instructional Rounds programme is likely to be a set of recommendations to address the problem of practice and to improve student outcomes.

Teacher Rounds (Del Prete, 2013) also draws on the medical metaphor and also involve observation, reflection and inquiry. Like Instructional Rounds, the work involves classroom observation by a group and the generation of low-inference observation data. Unlike Instructional Rounds, however, Teacher Rounds are not intended to be management-led and they do not usually involve teachers from more than one school; they are not usually part of a network or district-wide approach to system development. Teachers tend to come from the one school, to generate their own problems of practice and to be more genuinely collaborative in intent (peers working together) and intimate. In a Teacher Round, the class teacher decides the focus of the observation for their peer group of Rounds participants (usually between three and seven, according to Del Prete, 2013), hosts the observation and formulates the Round inquiry, which is a set of questions suggesting what to look for, listen for or ask in observing the teaching. Further information about the method in operation is provided later in the article as we are focusing on this particular version of Rounds – Teacher Rounds – in our discussion. Overall, Del Prete (2013) suggests that Teacher Rounds can put teaching and learning at the centre of the life of the school and can unpack the complexities of these processes by attempting to get greater insight, for example by trying to understand the multiple perspectives of the students in the observed lessons.

Teacher Rounds, being teacher- (practitioner-) led and teaching-focused, align with a general movement away from a 'one size fits all' approach to continuing professional development (CPD). The method also claims to provide teachers with more control over the development of their practices in such a way that their commitment to improving outcomes for students is more effectively harnessed.

2. **Formative interventions: Developing practice through research**

In this section, we discuss Rounds as a practice-developing, formative intervention in a comparison with the CHAT tradition of formative interventions, represented most often by Developmental Work Research (DWR).

2.1. *DWR: A CHAT-informed approach to practice-developing research*

Finnish interventionist-researcher Yrjö Engeström has developed a methodology of formative intervention known as DWR (Engeström, 2007) based on the Vygotskian principle of 'dual stimulation' (Vygotsky, 1974), sometimes known as the

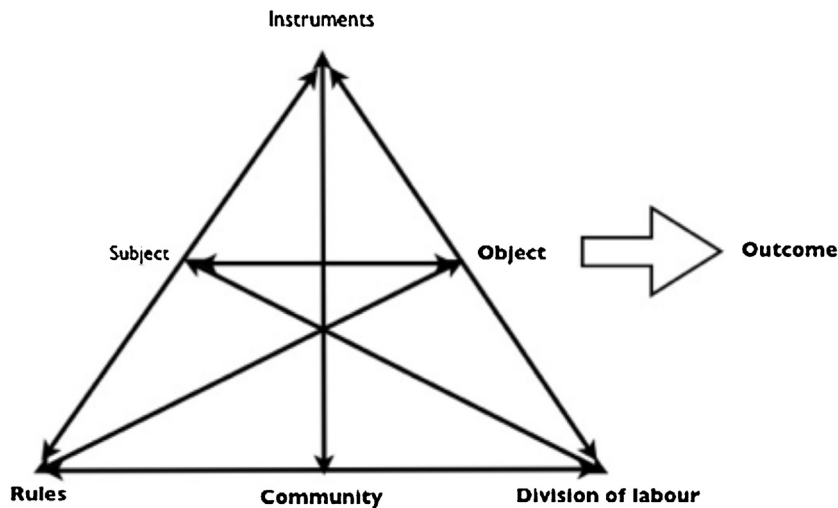
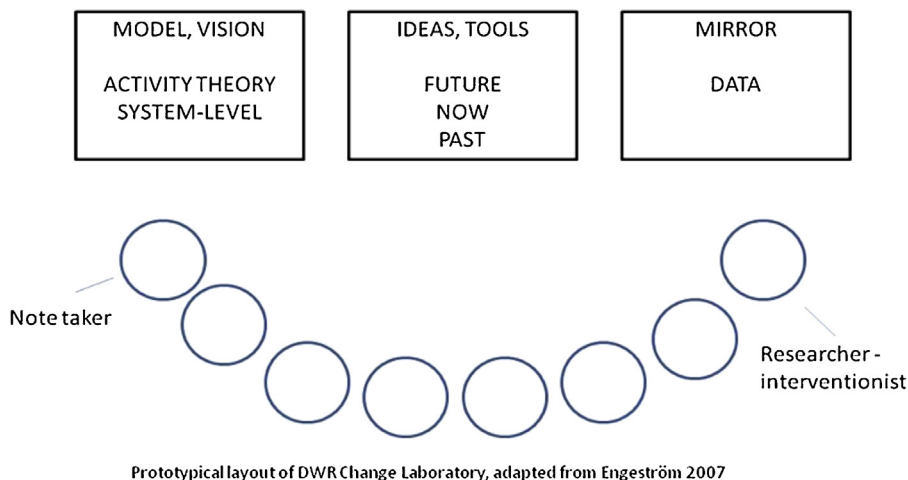


Fig. 1. The representation of the human activity system adapted from Engeström et al. (1999).

'double stimulation strategy' or the 'instrumental method' (Ellis, 2010). From this perspective, Engeström notes that an intervention is meant to be disruptive but intended to be developmental in relation to the practice in which the intervention takes place. An intervention such as DWR is meant to be deliberate, systematic and to some extent halt or slow down business-as-usual in order for the practice to be examined closely by the practitioners and a new critical consciousness among practitioners stimulated. The triangular representation of the human activity system takes centre stage in DWR interventions (see Fig. 1).

The claim for DWR as a methodology of formative intervention methodology is that it enables participants to do more than simply work on improving their own performance either through action research methods or through participation in a researcher-led design experiment. DWR claims to develop critical understanding among participants of how their existing practices and discourses have been shaped culturally and historically so that they might be worked on and developed at the level of the social system. The aim is the development of what Engeström calls 'critical design agency' among the practitioners (Engeström, 2007). This critical consciousness, it is claimed, is stimulated by the power of the conceptual tools of activity theory (represented by the triangular image of the activity system) in helping participants analyse how the object of their collective activity is constructed, how rules and a division of labour have emerged historically within a community of practitioners, and how cultural tools are appropriated by members of that community—and how these might be changed for the better. In brief, the process can be summarised as follows.

A data-driven, developmental workshop (a 'Change Laboratory') of participating practitioners is facilitated by one or more 'researcher-interventionists'. Notes are taken of the group's interactions (and sometimes a video recording of the whole event). The researcher introduces evidence of current practices and discourses using one of three displays known as the 'mirror' (see Fig. 2).



Prototypical layout of DWR Change Laboratory, adapted from Engeström 2007

Fig. 2. A prototypical layout of the Change Laboratory adapted from Engeström (2007).

The 'mirror data' presented is selected in order to highlight contradictions and disturbances in the activity systems and uses video recording. 'Mirror data' is selected, in other words, to highlight problems of practice, areas where there are breakdowns or glitches in the work that people are trying to do. Another display (labelled 'model/vision') is used for theoretical analysis of the data with the practitioners using the activity system triangle and the third display, 'ideas/tools', for recording key realisations or concepts in the emerging analysis as well as potential 'solutions'. The displays have three historical layers – 'past, now, future' – and the researcher-interventionists begin with the present problem, seek the roots of this problem historically and then model or 'envision' future designs for a re-configured practice. Solutions and visions are not expressed in absolute terms but as partial and contingent and the individual Change Laboratory is situated within a series of such workshops, part of a 'cycle of expansive learning' (ibid: 372). Even from this brief explanation, it might be apparent that DWR, as initiated and elaborated by Engeström and his colleagues, has become increasingly systematised as a methodological genre of intervention.

Some instantiations of this approach in working with teachers have made reasonable adjustments to the established method or made new emphases. For example, in Ellis's work (e.g. 2011) there has been no video-taping of the Change Laboratory and instead audio-recordings have been used for analysis. Similarly, Author 1 has also tried to account for the human dimension of participating in such an intervention—the way teachers have humoured him, for example, by playing along with '[Viv's] triangle thing' to start with; or by emphasizing the length of time it takes to build relationships with teachers for this type of intervention to have a chance of working well. These emphases on the social and affective dimensions of taking part in a Change Laboratory have not previously featured significantly in DWR studies.

The most common remark from teachers that have been generous enough to participate in DWR projects with Ellis is that they have a headache. On one level, we might speculate that a headache is to be expected when an additional task is added at the end of a busy school day or during a lunchtime. But our sense is that the headache is also produced when attempting to deal with some fairly abstract theoretical or conceptual tools (represented by the triangle) through which teachers are being asked to look at data representing their own current practices. It is hard work and our reading of the DWR research literature leads us to believe that CHAT-informed researchers sometimes minimise that fact.

Our first claim for the usefulness of a CHAT-informed intervention approach such as DWR is that the theoretical triangle forces some distance from the everyday immersion in practices (that can lead to what Lave, 1988 called 'core blindness'), gives some tools for analyzing those practices, creates a mediating social space (the Change Laboratory) for practitioners to engage in dialogic interaction that might lead to new ideas and new solutions that can then be taken back into collective practices for that organisation. So, in a sense, the theory is the thing; the theory is a tool with which to analyse and change things for the better rather than a heuristic to describe what happens or some vocabulary that be used as an overlay in descriptions of the intervention.

Second, DWR understands practice as an anthropologist might: it is a cultural phenomenon, one that has developed historically, and is inevitably collective in that we only know if we are engaged in a practice with reference to other practitioners of that practice (cf. Lampert, 2009). So our practice as researchers is not just what we, the authors do but what we do in relation to the activities of other researchers locally, in our immediate professional community, as well as in relation to the traditions of the cultural practice known as educational research around the world. DWR-type interventions address the question or problem of practice, collectively, in a particular work situation but always connected to the historically-evolving streams of practices that are in the culture. In this way DWR attempts to open up examination of the history of the particular activity setting to the more general history of the practice, its traditions, paradigms and cultures. So, through DWR-type interventions, the practice of the individual teacher may develop but does so (or should do so) alongside the collective development of the practices in the setting. Again, there is good evidence of collective development in the CHAT research literature (c.f. Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999). It also seems to us to be a good way of building a stronger culture in the work-place and of stimulating the growth of shared responsibilities and mutual respect and trust. Such consequential outcomes of DWR interventions, therefore, would seem especially suitable for professions such as teaching.

2.2. Teacher Rounds as a formative intervention

Next, in turning to Rounds, we need to be clear that Rounds does not identify itself primarily as a research methodology *per se* but rather as a research-based means of practice development (an activity that encompasses overlapping terms such as professional development and school improvement). It does not, as DWR does, see itself as simultaneously developing practice *and* theory. It may align with an overall approach that could be described as 'practitioner research' (in its emphasis on the systematic collection of observational data, for example) but it is primarily offered as a tool for developing practice. Nonetheless, we do wish to explore Rounds in terms of methodology and to do so in ways that might go beyond regarding research on Rounds as evaluation of its outcomes or as case studies of Rounds in action. To do so, we have selected one of the influential versions of Rounds—known as Teacher Rounds, derived from the work of Del Prete (2013).

Del Prete (2013) suggests that the purposes of Teacher Rounds are 'to support teachers in understanding student learning and in developing their practice individually and collectively' (p. 1). A four-part protocol is described:

1. 'Preparing the Round Sheet'—providing the essential context in written form; identifying the problem of practice posed by the host teacher focused on student learning; then, the 'Round Inquiry' or guiding questions;

2. 'The Preround Orientation'—a discussion of the Round Sheet with all participants to ensure that the context, the problem of practice and the guiding questions are understood;
3. 'The Round'—during which participants gather data on the lesson being taught by the host teacher, focusing on their problem of practice and guiding questions; the data being generated here is of the kind sometimes called 'low inference' (the point being to discourage participants from rushing to interpretation and judgement);
4. 'The Postround reflection'—in which observation notes are shared descriptively with reference to the Rounds question; followed by speculations and tentative hypotheses of the 'what if' kind; followed by a section summing up what has been discovered through the Rounds process and a reflection on the process itself. (Del Prete, 2013, pp. 141–144).

There are some obvious similarities of method (and, we argue, methodology) with DWR that we can immediately notice here. First, the problem of practice to be examined and deliberated comes from the teacher, in this case, the individual teacher. It is self-initiated and self-motivated. Second, data is generated that represents that problem of practice not as an end in itself but as a means to the end of improving practice. This use of data corresponds to DWR's notion of 'mirror data'—representations that can be held up to and reflect back on the practitioner(s). Third, the data is then the focus for joint analysis in the Postrounds discussion, a mediating social space somewhat like the Change Laboratory of DWR, in which participants examine current practices in order to formulate new ideas about future practices. The Change Laboratory and the Postrounds discussion are essentially at the heart of both approaches. In both Teacher Rounds and DWR, collegial trust and respect are essential dispositions for the communication between participants to be as open as it needs to be. And both Teacher Rounds and DWR have a strong future orientation rather than an evaluative and backward-looking one.

Using the language of CHAT, Teacher Rounds might be understood as an instrument for examining problems of the practice of teaching. The Rounds protocol (conceptualised as a tool for practice-development within a school-based activity system) is donated to participating teachers with an invitation to appropriate its structure, language and values. In this sense, Rounds are a mediating tool that subjects (teachers) can use to work on the object of their activity—an aspect of classroom teaching and their students' learning. A set of ground rules for participation are set up within the community of teachers participating in Rounds, subject to a specific division of labour (essentially, observers and the observed supported by a facilitator or facilitators who might be the host teacher or another). Discussion of classroom data generated by the observers is the means by which the new tool is socially mediated in the multiple voices of the participating teachers. An iteration of Teacher Rounds can therefore be interpreted as an activity system within a particular sociocultural tradition of professional development. Rounds, in this sense, are what Vygotsky referred to as a 'second series of stimuli' or 'auxiliary means' (Vygotsky, 1974) that participants might use to work on the first stimulus or the actual problem of practice.

2.3. Three (inter-related) methodological questions

When considering Rounds and DWR from a methodological perspective, the first question we raise is the relationship between individual (teacher) and organisational (school) development in claims for their potential as research-based practice-development. In his elaboration of Teacher Rounds, Del Prete (2013, p. 1 and *passim*) argues that they are a means of 'developing [teachers'] practice individually and collectively'. What is not clear to us, however, is the process by which improvements in the individual teachers' performance also create collective gains? Is it only a question of accumulation or aggregation of insights by the individual teachers? In other words, is it a means of scaling-up improvement in individuals' work one-by-one or is there another dimension in which collective practice-development is created? It seems to us that one possible dimension comes from the kind of relational work required to conduct and keep conducting Teacher Rounds in a school on a systematic basis. Hosting and participating in a programme of Teacher Rounds requires some pretty formidable 'relational agency', as Edwards (2010) has put it: the capacity to relate to each other on the basis of shared but unevenly distributed knowledge; to recognise the expertise of the other; and to exercise some freedom of movement in one's own practices in a responsive way. Lots of things can go on in schools and school districts that mitigate against the development of this form of specifically relational agency. More often, it seems, the relations required are those of high-stakes, hierarchical accountability. So Teacher Rounds either needs to sit within relatively open, non-hierarchical school leadership structures or they might help to create such structures. Indeed, one might argue that Rounds might be an especially good tool for creating the kinds of 'professional behaviour' or, perhaps more accurately, developing the professional culture that has been identified as a condition for the improvement of teaching with one of the higher degrees of validity in a meta-analysis of the best evidence about 'great teaching' by the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) and the Sutton Trust (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Elliot Major, 2014). A 'supportive professional environment' within which classroom observation by peers can inform collective practice-development was identified an approach with 'moderate validity' (the best that can be claimed) in this recent study. Methodologically, the point we are making here is that in order to enact Rounds (or indeed DWR) with any chance of success, certain ethical commitments (regarding leadership and accountability) within the practice setting are probably important.

Second, we are also interested in how there may be a collective gain in knowledge (a common expectation of research) arising from systematic participation in Teacher Rounds; how is the new knowledge developed or existing bodies of knowledge accessed? This question is concerned with theory or abstract knowledge that might come from outside of the participants in the Teacher Rounds and outside the context of the school. Of course, one answer might be that there is not an explicit role for theory in the Rounds approach. It might be argued that Rounds are not primarily concerned with the

collaborative construction of *new* knowledge that can develop practice but about the collaborative construction of relationships and professional norms that can improve teaching and learning. Alternatively, it may instead be a means of encouraging access to the existing professional knowledge-base, however that is conceptualised (whether in terms of historical traditions of practice-relevant or applied research, professional teaching standards or tacit knowledge/professional wisdom). In terms of a theory of change underlying Rounds, it does seem that Teacher Rounds relies on collegial, professional structures and patterns of interaction and the emphasis on practice ('learning in and through practice') seems to be one in which teacher knowledge remains tacit. This approach to theory is a rather different one to CHAT and DWR, specifically, where theory is used to bring out new understandings that can be put to use in the world rather than as an end in itself. It is theory in CHAT that allows what goes on in one activity setting – one Teacher Round in one school, for example – to have relevance and meaning beyond that specific Round and school. Theory, in other words, that enables the insights and new knowledge collaboratively constructed by participants to have public significance beyond the immediate practice setting and thereby (at least in potentially) contribute to wider, systemic improvement.

By expecting participants in DWR to use some theoretical language, the assumption is they will have more control over their practices and this greater control in part arises from their awareness of how local practices relate to the broader cultural and historically-evolving streams of practices. The increased control and insight derives from the methodology's potential to raise participants' critical consciousness of their own situation and to envisage a new future for their participation in the collective practice. Gower (2015) and Estrela (1999) make a case for this integration of critical conscientisation in all teacher development activities, arguing an essential case for participants to engage in:

a critical interpretation of the pedagogical reality and the discovery of its historicity, compelling the teacher to question himself [sic] about his knowledge/praxis and its origins and about the social and institutional contexts (Estrela 1999: 241)

Theory provides a language that travels beyond the immediate and local; it can, as we have already noted, also give you a headache. So we are not arguing for a CHAT-like commitment to the unique properties of theoretical mediation but we do want to ask if the success or otherwise of Teacher Rounds in a particular setting depends only on the quality of relationships within the Rounds group or whether the available knowledge distributed among that group is also a factor. Fundamentally, does the Rounds approach rely on there always being sufficient knowledge held within the social situation of the Round for the problem of practice to be analysed and acted upon? When using Rounds in the pre-service teacher education setting, this question is particularly important; do novice teachers have the capacity to 'see' in classrooms and therefore perceive distinctions that might lead to the creation of new knowledge as effectively as more experienced teachers? This question is not meant to suggest an intrinsic deficiency in participating teachers (nor specifically in novices) but to suggest that great variation within any population of teachers (or, for that matter, any group of professionals) is a reality. And when this social situation is structured by strong lines of vertical accountability and managerialist discourses, the possibilities for practitioners to develop the kinds of relational agency necessary to know where the knowledge is and how to access or, indeed, how to innovate and develop new knowledge, are severely constrained.

Thirdly, we ask about the meaning of collaboration within Rounds and the implication that creating such spaces for collaborative learning will lead to forms of dialogic interaction through which the professional knowledge base might be accessed (or new forms of knowledge produced by participants) and practice changed for the better. In several respects, Rounds correspond to the ideal-type professional learning community defined by Seashore Louis (2012) in that they involve collective work, shared leadership, a focus on reflective inquiry within a community that shares values and norms (p. 479). However, within this definition and, indeed, within the Rounds protocol itself, there are several assumptions, not the least of which is that certain values and norms are indeed shared (such as that collaboration and dialogue are useful, for example). It seems to us that while Rounds might be a useful way of encouraging collaborative learning, there may be a preceding step in which the conditions for collaboration and safe spaces for learning and dialogue are developed within the organisation and this is a role for school leaders. The responsibility of leadership *per se* to create such conditions cannot always be assumed and the role of leaders also raises the question as to the extent such collaboration is enforced as a leadership tool. Flores (2012) notes that collaboration is often enforced as part of reforms of teacher professionalism where the goal is not to open up new thinking but to coerce individuals to adopt the policy agenda or management line. Within such enforced collaborations, the necessity of engaging teachers in genuine participation and maintaining their commitment is difficult, especially when shared values and ideals are assumed. The risk of Rounds becoming just such enforced collaboration we believe is greater in the Instructional Rounds variety than in Teacher Rounds but the risk remains.

At a more fundamental level, the emphasis on dialogue within Rounds, as within professional learning communities overall, assumes that the outcome will always be the critical consciousness among participants that is required in order to analyse current practices and come up with new designs for the future. However, it is the ways in which participants in Rounds engage in collaborative dialogue will determine the extent of critical conscientisation, as Cameron (2002) notes:

Conscientisation can be seen as the 'product' of dialogic education, although this distinction tends to dichotomise these two concepts; while Dialogue is a necessary condition of Conscientisation, just as theory is a necessary condition of practice, Conscientisation, the manifestation of transformative properties of the educational approach, does not automatically lead to a reconstruction of personal and political ideologies. The nature of the Dialogue itself will determine whether social action will be a potential outcome. ... (p. 4)

Collaborative dialogue, in other words, may become merely polite conversation or a ‘talking shop’ and not inevitably a precursor to the kinds of social action that will lead to positive change in practice. In terms of the best evidence, [Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung \(2007\)](#) and other researchers (e.g. [Coe et al., 2014](#)) note the need for ‘challenge’ within professional learning communities of any kind (whether Rounds, Lesson Study groups or action learning sets, etc.), especially when dealing with observations of teaching by peers. Such challenge may focus on improving student outcomes in a fairly instrumental sense or it may focus on stimulating an analysis of the structural contradictions that are encountered by participants in the process of improving their practice (as DWR claims to do), but challenge does seem to be an essential feature of dialogue that is likely to be productive (to lead to critical conscientisation and social action). Collaboration, in this sense, means some difficult, perhaps uncomfortable and disruptive conversations.

Nonetheless, Rounds as a method does involve the shared physical space and shared experience that [Childs et al., 2013](#) identified as important in stimulating teacher collaboration. A Round orientation and de-briefing, in particular, become a meeting point for participating teachers, something that Mawhinney described as a ‘congregational space’ for ‘collective sense-making’ ([Hammersley, 1984](#)).

2.3.1. *Some directions for research*

The questions we have raised about Rounds (and indeed DWR) suggest lines of inquiry that address significant educational and social science problems: the relationship between the individual and the collective in the research-based development of a cultural practice; the role of theory or abstract, propositional knowledge in change and practice-development; and the meaning of collaboration in institutions such as schools that have been structured in ways that can make open communication difficult or even impossible, as well as the meaning of research in political situations where leaders and policy-makers always have ‘the answer’ to any problem. The plans for our own Rounds intervention attempt to address these questions directly. The most immediate research direction for us, though, is that we wish to examine closely the interaction of the Rounds orientation and the Postrounds discussion as conversational events. We wish to trace in the participants’ spoken interaction the delineation of key ideas, the ways in which issues (or the ‘problem of practice’) in the observation data are picked out by the participants and how they are identified in more or less similar ways. Then to see how collective distinctions are made – between alternative conceptions of ‘good ideas’, for example – and on what basis. What are the explanations the teachers give for these distinctions and how do they substantiate them? Do they refer to other examples of practice, for example? Or do they refer to research studies, knowledge remembered from Master’s degrees or pre-service/initial teacher preparation? Do they justify their points by referring to nominally shared values and ideals? Analysing the language of the Postrounds discussion in these sorts of ways would provide some useful insights into how and on what basis participating teachers come up with ideas that might improve practice, how they explain and justify them and how they propose operationalizing them. Such a study might help to address our questions about the relationship between the individual and the collective, the role of theory and the meaning of collaboration.

Second, we wish to explore how the self-initiated and self-motivated concerns and questions of the individual teacher – questions about their own practice – might or might not relate to broader questions of collective (department or school) development. Del Prete has referred to the problems school improvement researchers have identified when both the problem of practice is identified for the teacher and also the means of addressing it. [Hargreaves \(2010\)](#) called this ‘contrived collegiality’ but it also signals the way in which a genuinely open means, or tool, for professional development such as Teacher Rounds can be appropriated within a hierarchical and accountability-driven school culture to enforce compliance and ensure performativity. On the other hand, does a succession of individually-hosted Teacher Rounds lead to the kinds of collective improvement that are necessary to do the best by all of the children in our schools? Can the collective development of a practice come from the accumulation of sufficient individual teachers’ practices? And how? The significance of these questions for us is that any answers will need to come from research that investigates the phenomenon at multiple levels, understands the complex social ecologies of schools and classrooms and recognises that, sometime, there may be conflicts and contradictions within and between the levels.

3. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the potential of Rounds as a type of research-based formative intervention from a methodological perspective and in a comparison with the cultural-historical tradition of DWR. As such, we believe the article is significant in offering both a specific, methodological analysis of Rounds and an exploration of key methodological questions underlying types of research (such as DWR) that claim the potential to develop practice. We have discussed Rounds as an approach to identifying, recognising and reconfiguring problems of practice in the social world of classrooms, an approach built on a commitment to creating a supportive professional environment and encouraging genuine collaboration among teachers through systematic enquiry. Rounds have been seen to work by drawing groups of teachers together in such a way that their professional creativity is stimulated and new ideas produced collectively to address real problems ([Del Prete, 2013](#); [Ellis, 2013](#)). We have also identified three lines of interest from a methodological standpoint: first, the tension between the improvement of individual teacher performance and the wider collective development of the practice of teaching within the context of school improvement; second, the role or otherwise of theory or abstract, externally-derived ideas in moving a practice forward through research; the meaning of collaboration (let alone collaborative research) within often hierarchical organisations such as schools that are also subject to strong lines of vertical

accountability. We do not want to appear to be arguing for the unique properties of CHAT as a theory of learning, change and development. CHAT has its own problems, perhaps such as an ironic over-reliance on theory and its unique mediating potential (often signalled in the literature by a plethora of triangles). It may be, however, that CHAT can inform the Rounds approach to teacher development and school improvement with some useful responses to questions about the role of theory, the individual/collective relationship and the meaning of collaboration in stimulating change and developing practice.

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